

Obituaries

Maida Heatter, prolific cookbook author who was dubbed the 'Queen of Cake,' dies at 102

By [Bonnie S. Benwick](#)

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Maida Heatter, the spirited self-taught baker and cookbook author who handed out meticulously wrapped brownies as business cards and won the admiration of home bakers and famous chefs alike, died June 6 at her home in Miami Beach. She was 102.

Her sister-in-law and longtime caretaker, Connie Heatter, confirmed the death and said she had dementia.

"I had no training, so I wasn't bound by any rules," Ms. Heatter once said. But she was a perfectionist, which she often attributed to her being born under the Virgo sign. She tested recipes 15 to 20 times and retested every recipe in her first book after discovering that her oven was off by 35 degrees. She then advised home bakers to make sure their ovens were properly calibrated.

So solid were her recipes that titles such as the Best Damn Lemon Cake, Positively-the-Absolute-Best-Chocolate-Chip-Cookies and Four-Star French Chocolate Ice Cream were accepted as fact. *Saveur* magazine called her the "Queen of Cake." Chefs and home cooks admired her.

"Whenever someone tells me they want to learn to bake, I tell them to start with Maida Heatter's books. That's what I did," said cookbook author Dorie Greenspan, who wrote the forward to Ms. Heatter's most recent book, published in April. "She wrote recipes that made you feel she was there with you, helping you at every step and cheering you on. And those recipes could always be trusted. She was called 'Queen of Cake,' but in my house I thought of her as a kitchen god."

Before her public breakthrough in the 1970s, Ms. Heatter went about the business of making desserts for her husband's coffee shop turned restaurant in Miami Beach. One of her more noteworthy promotional gimmicks had nothing to do with baking, and it led to fame and a lifelong friendship with then-New York Times food critic Craig Claiborne.

Once Ms. Heatter learned that the 1968 Republican National Convention was to be held in Miami Beach, she dreamed up the elephant omelet, named after the GOP logo. Initially a joke she thought up over drinks, she grew determined to serve it at the restaurant, which was owned by her third husband, retired airline pilot Ralph Daniels.

She tracked down a distributor of canned elephant meat and contacted experts in Kenya for the best way to prepare it. The dish got widespread media attention even though only a single order was served.

Claiborne was drawn in, but came away impressed by the desserts Ms. Heatter was making for the restaurant and by the recipes she handed out. Daniels encouraged her to write them comprehensively, which became Ms. Heatter's hallmark.

Claiborne urged her to do a cookbook and championed her in print, calling her “the foremost food authority in Florida.” Five years later, Ms. Heatter shipped a completed, typed manuscript to Alfred A. Knopf in New York. She figured that if the publishing house was good enough for Julia Child, it would do for her as well.

Based on the strength of Ms. Heatter’s well-constructed recipes, Knopf published the “Book of Great Desserts” in 1974 yet did not promote it. Word spread through newspaper food sections and wire services, then Woman’s Day magazine bought the rights to the book.

By the time Ms. Heatter produced a third cookbook, on chocolate desserts, Knopf sent her on a 15-city tour. The book sold 100,000 copies in its first year.

In 1983, she was asked to make dessert — her beloved Key lime pie — for a heads of state dinner at President Reagan’s Economic Summit Conference in Williamsburg, Va. Ms. Heatter had to find a source for the fruit, which was not commercially grown at the time. The 15 pies never made it to the table; they were dropped by the Secret Service, whose security detail included tasting the dessert.

Responding to newspaper reports that quoted her as saying, “It didn’t upset me one bit,” she wrote in her introduction to “Maida Heatter’s Pies and Tarts” (1997): “Don’t believe everything you read.”

Those who were fortunate enough to visit Ms. Heatter at the Miami Beach home she and Daniels built in 1957 saw her keen design sensibility, culinary foresight and graciousness. Her kitchen was open to the dining room and featured double wall ovens that lasted until 2010. Baked goods were always at the ready; a two-foot-tall speculoos cookie mold of a cat greeted guests at the door.

“She was a great lady,” said chef-restaurateur Wolfgang Puck, a close friend of Ms. Heatter’s since the 1970s when she taught cooking classes at Ma Maison, a French bistro he co-owned in Los Angeles. “She wrote recipes that were long and really foolproof.”

“Maida had the mind of a chef even though she never worked in great quantities,” said her longtime friend, cookbook author Nick Malgieri. “Her cakes with superlatives in the recipe titles were just that. She made a damn fine cookie, too.”

Maida Heatter was born Sept. 7, 1916, in Freeport, N.Y., the older of two children of the former Saidie Hermalin and Gabriel Heatter. Throughout her life, Ms. Heatter liked to regale her friends with tales of summers spent in the Adirondacks, winters in Miami Beach and her childhood on Park Avenue in Manhattan, where her charismatic parents received celebrities and newsmakers.

Gabriel Heatter was a nationally known radio broadcaster in the 1940s and ’50s — best-known for his relentlessly upbeat sign-on during World War II: “Ah, there’s good news tonight.”

Saidie Heatter, a former elementary school teacher, had a knack for last-minute, fabulous entertaining. “Let’s go into the kitchen and play,” is what young Maida heard her mother say. As a result, time spent preparing food and family meals became a source of fun — an attitude that never wavered for Saidie’s daughter.

Ms. Heatter studied at the Pratt Institute, where she earned a degree in fashion illustration that led to her first job in the New York Herald Tribune's retail merchandising division. Her jewelry-making hobby turned into a full-time business that launched lines sold at Macy's, Henri Bendel and Bergdorf Goodman. On occasion, lucky collectors can find a vintage Maida Heatter bracelet on eBay.

She has written or co-written more than 20 cookbooks, including the recently published "Happiness Is Baking: Favorite Desserts From the Queen of Cake." She also earned three James Beard awards and was inducted to the foundation's Cookbook Hall of Fame. She was named to the Who's Who of Food and Beverage in America and to the Chocolatier Hall of Fame.

Her first two marriages — to David Evins, who later became a noted shoe designer for first ladies, and to Ellis A. Gimbel Jr., a stockbroker whose family owned Gimbels department store — ended in divorce.

She had no immediate survivors. Illustrator Toni Evins, who was Ms. Heatter's only child and whose artwork graces some of her mother's cookbooks, died in 1989 in a glider accident. Ralph Daniels was diagnosed with cancer months later and died in 1991.

"After that, I guess I stayed in bed for four or five months; I really don't remember anything about that time," she later told a Miami reporter. "When I got myself together enough to walk into the kitchen and start baking, I started living again."

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